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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: REGIME RELEASES SALAI TUN THAN, 20 OTHER POLITICAL PRISONERS

1. (U) In a May 4 press release, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) announced the release of 21 political prisoners. Dr. Salai Tun Than, a well-respected academic who was arrested for staging a one-man political demonstration in 2001 was among those released. Salai Tun Than is an alumni of the University of Georgia and, as a result, has been of particular Congressional and Embassy interest since his arrest. In fact, COM Martinez raised Salai Tun Than's case directly with the third-ranking general in the regime, Secretary One General Khin Nyunt, in a meeting on April 27. This appears to be what triggered his release. Poloff met with Salai Tun Than and two of his daughters (including Yuzana, with whom Poloff has met previously) on May 5 and found him tired but well and extremely happy to be out of prison. Salai Tun Than said authorities made a special point of telling him that his release was not the result of any external pressure. He told Poloff, however, that in his opinion prisoner releases would only occur as a direct result of pressure.

2. (U) The professor also reported that he had been required to sign a "Section 401" agreement, which obligated him to serve the remaining balance of his sentence if he is taken into custody again. He said he was a little nervous about how the authorities might react to a meeting with Poloff but he was taking the chance because he has had contacts with the Embassy in the past. He said he plans to return to his earlier activities as much as possible (advocating agricultural reforms for Chin farmers), hoping that if he is "transparent" in his activities, authorities will have no grounds to rearrest him.

3. (U) Regarding his recent hunger strike, Dr. Tun Than said prison authorities quickly acceded to most of his demands (no hoods on political prisoners, permission to possess a Bible, a clock in the ward of political prisoners at the prison hospital) so he called off the strike after just two days. He said just prior to the hunger strike on April 27, prison authorities had begun questioning him about the activities he might undertake if he were released. The professor now realizes that authorities were already considering whether to release him at that time. He said he told the authorities he planned to thank the NLD's Aung San Suu Kyi for her party's support for his family during his incarceration. The authorities told him this was not a wise thing and he said he agreed that he would not do it if he were a "normal" citizen, but he had a special situation and would want to pay his respects. He said the authorities finally relented when he invited them along to visit the NLD, but cautioned him to not discuss politics.

4. (U) Among the other political prisoners released, there were 12 NLD members, including two who are well-known in the organization. Win Thein was a young student who provided security for Aung San Suu Kyi in the early days of the party. He was arrested in 1989 and is now 36 years old. Ms. Kyi Kyi Win is an NLD member from a Rangoon suburb who has been jailed since 1998 because of activism on behalf of the party in all parts of the country. NLD Vice Chairman U Tin Oo told Poloff, "she used to give Military Intelligence fits!" The NLD was pleased to have the releases but noted that there are many more cases of old, and infirm political prisoners, many of whom have been in prison well past their original sentences.

Martinez